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ABSTRACT

Although it has become commonplace in our society for children to take care of themselves for periods of time every day while their parents work, not much is known about the adequacy or effects of these self-care arrangements. Recent studies have reached very different conclusions regarding academic performance, social skills, self-esteem, school adjustment, influence of peers, and behavior problems of latchkey children. A number of educational curricula have been developed to help children who stay alone to care for themselves, and at least one program attempts to facilitate decision-making about whether to place a child in self-care. Concern about the number of children staying alone has stimulated action on the part of the federal government, state governments, and local communities. (PCB)

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ERIC Digest

Latchkey Children

Ellen B. Gray

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The Number of "Latchkey Children"

The majority of children in this country are now growing up in families in which both parents or the only parent works outside of the home. It has become commonplace in our society for children to take care of themselves for periods of time every day. Just how common this phenomenon is is a matter of some dispute. While recent census data suggest that only 7.2 percent of children between the ages of 5 and 13—about two million—spend time in self-care, many experts estimate that over a quarter of the children who are between 6 and 14 years old spend time caring for themselves, most of them regularly.

Effects of Self-care on Children

Not much is known about the adequacy or effects of these self-care arrangements. Experts are just beginning to question the results of children being left alone or in the care of an older sibling on a regular basis. Their conclusions vary. Some are sanguine about the effect on children's development:

- —Galambos and Garbarino (1983) found no difference in academic achievement or school adjustment between small-town fifth and seventh graders in self-care and their adult-supervised peers.
- —Rodman, Pratto, and Nelson (1985) found no difference in self-esteem, social skills, or sense of control over their own lives between fourth grade children in self-care and fourth graders supervised by parents.
- —Hedlin and her colleagues (1986) studied 1200 children in kindergarten through eighth grade, and found that 80% of the children in self-care said that they loved it or usually liked it.
- —Vandell's study of 349 Dallas third graders (1986) showed no differences in parents', peers' or childrens' ratings of the social and study skills of those who went home to their mothers as opposed to those in latchkey situations.

Other studies have reached very different conclusions, however:

- —Woods (1972) reported that the low-income urban fifth graders in self-care whom she studied had more academic and social problems than those in traditional after-school arrangements.
- —Steinberg's study (1986) of fifth, sixth, eighth, and ninth graders showed that the more removed from adult supervision adolescents are, the more they are susceptible to peer pressure to commit antisocial acts.
- —Thomas Long (in press) found that as children spend more time unattended in their homes, the incidence of experimentation with alcohol and sex increases.

It should be noted that these studies dealt with different age groups, community characteristics, and outcome measures, and therefore are not strictly comparable. They also do not deal with a question many people have about the effect of self-care on children: What is the emotional impact?

Preparatory Programs for Self-care

A number of educational curricula have been developed to prepare children to care for themselves. These programs provide information, develop skills, and encourage communication within families about child self-care. Most are targeted to children who already spend time alone, but at least one ("I'm in Charge") facilitates decision-making about whether to place a particular child in self-care. Seventeen of these programs and books are listed in a booklet published by the National Committee for Prevention of Child Abuse (1986) cited below in the For More Information section.

Effectiveness of Programs for Latchkey Children

Until recently, almost nothing was known about the effectiveness of programs designed to prepare children for self-care. One of the few evaluations of a program for teaching self-care skills which has been reported in the literature suggests the value of a specific kind of training program. Jones and Haney (1984) found that six 40-minute sessions brought the fire safety skills mastery level of 7 to 10-year-old children from almost nothing to nearly 100 percent. Gray (in review) found that a program designed to prepare latchkey children for self-care increased parent-child communication and

agreement about safety and other self-care issues. The program also increased the children's confidence, but their loneliness persisted.

Alternatives to Self-care

Some families do not have to place their children in self-care but choose to do so anyway for any of a number of reasons. But for other families, self-care is the only recourse. Single parents who cannot afford supervised care, or who live in communities where supervised care is not available, must leave their children alone. Concern about this situation has stimulated action on many fronts. The Dependent Care Grants Program of the federal government, currently authorized for fiscal years 1987 through 1990 at $20 million per year, is a block grant for school-age child care and dependent care information and referral. Sixty percent of the funds from these grants—which were granted in 1986 to every state but South Dakota (which didn't apply)—is slated to go to program development, and 40% to information and referral.

Concern has prompted action on the state level as well. New York, for example, passed legislation to make $300,000 available to its communities to stimulate the development of new programs that provide care and supervision for school-age children.

The greatest effort in this area is being expended in local communities, however. Nonprofit agencies and local corporations are starting to provide after-school care, and some community hospitals even provide sick child day care.

Summary

It is clear that many children are currently in self-care. The exact number is not known, perhaps in part because this is such an emotional issue for some family members that they cannot be completely candid about it. Self-care is necessary at this point in our history because our social institutions have not kept pace with the "feminization of the workforce," but there is nevertheless much concern about whether self-care is good for children. Research on this issue is inconclusive. Among other things, this concern has prompted development of curricula for latchkey children. Although there is little research on the effectiveness of these programs, there is some suggestion that they do a better job of imparting information than dealing with feelings. All levels of the government and the private sector are responding to the need for school-age child care, but this response is slow and, as yet, inadequate. The issue of latchkey children is a sensitive one, and promises to be so for some time to come.

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